



GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

An international journal

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June 2022

Grounded Theory Review, Vol 21 (Issue #1), 11-15

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://groundedtheoryreview.org>

Originally published by Sociology Press

<https://sociologypress.com/>

Archived by the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies

<https://www.mentoringresearchers.org/>

Barney Glaser: Remembering a Genius

Odis E. Simmons

I was introduced to the ideas of Barney Glaser in 1967 when I was an undergraduate student at Sonoma State College (now University). I was pondering what field to declare as my major subject. I was interested in sociology, but after reading several randomly selected works of classic and contemporary sociology theorists, I had doubts. These works were written for an academic audience and at that time I didn't envision myself as an academic. Also, I couldn't imagine myself being able to write anything like what I was reading. While browsing through the sociology section in the campus bookstore, I came across Glaser & Strauss' *The Discover of Grounded Theory*. After skimming through it, I decided to buy it, take it home, and read it. It really grabbed me. This book sealed my interest in sociology and prompted me to declare it as my major.

Three of the five professors on the sociology faculty were symbolic interactionists who had done their PhD studies at UC Berkeley. I took every course I could from these three excellent professors. Looking back on it, I realize that I received doctoral level instruction in symbolic interaction from them.

One of them informed me that Strauss had recently founded a PhD program in sociology at The University of California San Francisco, where Glaser was also on the faculty. I was excited about the prospect of being able to learn grounded theory from its originators. When I inquired, I was disappointed to find out that student enrollment for the next year was closed. After a year in the Graduate Program in Social Psychology at The University of Nevada, Reno I applied to the UCSF program. I was admitted for the fall quarter of 1970. By this time, I had read Strauss' *Mirror & Masks*, Strauss & Lindesmith's *Social Psychology*, as well as Glaser & Strauss' *Awareness of Dying* and *Time for Dying*. I also reread *Discovery*. When I joined the UCSF program in 1970, I was well steeped in symbolic interactionism and as steeped in grounded theory as one could be at the time.

I enrolled in Barney's "Analysis" seminar, in which he taught, refined, and further developed grounded theory. I learned a huge amount in these seminars but, for me, they were only a small portion of what I learned from Barney. We both lived north of San Francisco. After my first seminar session with him he suggested we commute together. We met in the parking lot of a Mill Valley supermarket, where I joined him in his Volkswagen Squareback. Because parking around the university was very limited, he parked in Golden Gate Park and we walked a considerable distance to the Victorian house where the seminar was held. During the walk we usually talked about grounded theory. Afterwards we returned

to Mill Valley where we sat in his car and had long discussions about grounded theory, during which he continually took notes.

Our conversations fostered what became a lifelong friendship. We both had daughters close in age. Our families socialized, often at his home. As we watched our daughters play, we talked about grounded theory, "life, the universe and everything." Barney's seminars and these conversations were the most inspiring intellectual times of my life. Through them, my career and even personal life were shaped. I became determined to make grounded theory the focus on my career, even if it meant following a non-conventional academic/professional path, as he was doing.

Enter Anselm Strauss. When I arrived at UCSF, Strauss was in Geneva consulting with the World Health Organization. When he resumed his position at UCSF, I had completed two terms of Barney's seminar and countless deep conversations about grounded theory with him. I knew that Anselm was a highly regarded symbolic interactionist. His mentors at the University of Chicago were two symbolic interactionists, Herbert Blumer and Everett C. Hughes. Blumer interpreted George Herbert Mead's ideas into the symbolic interactionist sociological perspective. He coined the term, "symbolic interaction." He later became Chair of the sociology department at UC Berkeley where most of my undergraduate professors at Sonoma State completed their PhDs.

I enrolled in Anselm's methods seminar. During the first session, he talked about the value of doing a cursory preliminary literature review. He also suggested categories that would be useful for framing interview questions and analysis. I recognized these categories as being very consistent with symbolic interactionism. I was taken aback because in his seminars Barney was telling us specifically not to do either of those things. He advised us to refrain from doing a preliminary literature review to avoid preconceiving the topic. He emphasized we should suspend preconceptions of all sorts. He said we should begin as openly as possible and go where theoretical sampling leads us. Because it was my first seminar session with Anselm, I thought it was best to say nothing. However, during our commute back to Mill Valley, I told Barney, "You and Anselm aren't talking about the same thing." He didn't respond so I thought it best to let it go.

I had and have enormous respect, affection, and appreciation for Anselm. He was always very supportive of me. He was a kind, sweet, generous man. I selected him as my dissertation committee chair. He was a brilliant symbolic interactionist. But during the many hours of conversation I had with him in his office and his home, I felt more like I was talking with a symbolic interactionist than a grounded theorist. I feel blessed that I had these one-on-one conversations with Anselm. I learned a great deal from them as well as from his seminars.

Particularly after Barney's book, *Theoretical Sensitivity* was published, Anselm's view of grounded theory moved closer to Barney's. But in Barney's view not enough as is evident in his response to Strauss & Corbin's 1990, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

As the reader has seen in this book, Anselm and I have profoundly different views of Grounded Theory. What started out as a book of corrections ended up showing that Strauss indeed has used a different methodology all along, probably from the start in

1967 and it was not obvious until our more recent articulations and formulations. (p. 122)

The view of grounded theory that Anselm revealed during the seminars I completed with him was tempting because it was less anxiety producing. It gave me a clearer place to start and enabled me to imagine how my final product might look. Being emergent from the beginning and throughout, Barney's grounded theory was a bit scary. But Barney kept telling us, "Trust the process," so despite some trepidation, I did.

I presented this backstory to provide context for my main point. My rich multi-dimensional experiences with Barney and Anselm, beginning a mere three years after *Discovery* was published provided me with a unique vantage point. It enabled me to clearly discern their differences and contributions. No doubt, grounded theory emerged from their brilliant collaboration during their groundbreaking research on dying. They shared a disposition for innovation. They shared respect, appreciation, and affection for one another. They held similar views about the overemphasis in sociology on verifying theories and the underemphasis on developing theories. They also shared a concern with the disconnect between theory and research. They both thought theories should have an empirical foundation rather than being products of the imaginative speculations of theorists. Barney saw his major theory professor, Robert K. Merton's speculative, logically elaborated approach to theory development to be the antithesis of how theories should be developed.

They both made significant contributions to the genesis of grounded theory. Anselm's main contributions were related to the importance of meaning making and the value of qualitative field research. These were grounded in his strong association with symbolic interactionism. These were not a large part of Barney's graduate work. Barney fused what he learned at Columbia about sociological theory and methods—although often not in accord with his professors—with what he learned from studying literature at the Sorbonne and University of Freiberg during his stint in the U.S. Army with what he learned during his and Anselm's dying research at UCSF. Amongst his indispensable contributions to grounded theory was the constant comparative method, which he published independent of Anselm two years before *Discovery* was published. It was republished verbatim as Chapter V in *Discovery*. The constant comparative method is the irreplaceable core of grounded theory. Without it we wouldn't have grounded theory as it was originally conceived.

In his seminars, Strauss referred to grounded theory as merely one of many methods of qualitative analysis. Years before his 2008 book, *Doing Quantitative Grounded Theory*, Barney discussed constant comparison as a method of qualitative analysis that could be applied to any type of data, including quantitative. He talked about grounded theory as a full-range, general methodology for generating theories systematically grounded in data.

In 1978 Barney published *Theoretical Sensitivity*. In my view, this book is as important as *Discovery* because it portrays the full methodology. He sent me a prepublication copy. As I read it, I was reminded of our many conversations during my time as his student. When he published it, he sent me what is now one of my most precious possessions—an autographed copy with a brief comment, "To my colleague in arms." This

book was only the beginning of Barney's myriad of published refinements, clarifications, and elaborations on grounded theory.

Barney sought complete intellectual independence by pursuing a non-conventional approach to his career, mostly outside of institutional settings. He didn't like to waste time. He maintained that much of what is required by institutions is a waste of time—a sentiment to which I can relate. He sometimes irritated his colleagues at UCSF because he was often absent from faculty meetings. He referred to them as "in-presencing."

Subsequent to *Discovery*, Anselm published two methods books related to grounded theory. The first was in his 1987, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. It was his only solo grounded theory methods book. Initially, it didn't receive much attention as grounded theory, even from Barney, probably because the term grounded theory wasn't in the title. In this book, Anselm borrowed liberally from *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Like he did in the seminars, he characterized grounded theory as merely "a particular style of qualitative analysis of data" (p. xi). He minimized its magnitude and importance as, "one of many used in qualitative research" (p. xi). He also wrote, "There are some differences in his [Glaser's] specific teaching tactics and perhaps in his actual carrying out of research, but the differences are minor." (p. xiv) These statements highlight the gap between Anselm's and Barney's views about the scope of grounded theory. In this book, Anselm introduced "axial coding," to which Barney took great exception in his 1992 *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* reply to Strauss & Corbin's 1990 *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Strauss & Corbin's *Basics* book was Anselm's final methods book about grounded theory. Anselm had a very successful, wide ranging academic and professional career working in institutional settings. The focus of Barney's research/scholarly career was grounded theory. This enabled him to continually clarify and refine it.

My relationship to Barney was and still is profoundly important to me intellectually and personally. His advice was usually offered in brief revelatory maxims. His morsels of wisdom were so clarifying that my immediate mental reaction was, "Well of course! Why didn't I think of that?!" His maxims often helped me navigate through professional and personal opportunities and challenges.

For example, when I began conducting interviews with residents of an inpatient alcoholism facility for my dissertation research, I was frustrated that they appeared to be attempting to deceive me. I feared that this could bring my research to a halt. I mentioned this to Barney. His quick reply was "make your problem your topic!" He pointed out that they were doing this for a reason, and I should find out why. This simple advice turned my "problem" into an important research opportunity. Over the years I found this tidbit of advice useful in my professional and personal life. I shared it with my grounded theory mentees and students.

A related very useful morsel was his vernacular way of getting you to focus on the issues or problem that was being processed by individuals in an action scene, including ones from your personal life--"what they are working on?." I found this question to be very useful during my days as a counselor/therapist. For example, during the first session with couples, as I listened to each partner for a while, the answer to that question was usually, "trying to

convince me to side with them.” This enabled me to quickly address the issue so we could get on with it. This question remained useful throughout the counseling/therapy process.

A maxim he used to reduce students’ fears about scholarly criticism was what he termed “the rule of thirds.” He maintained, “If one third of the people who read your work hate it, one third are indifferent, and one third love it, you’ve succeeded.”

Barney had an uncanny ability for instantly pinpointing essentials. Sometimes in conversations he would suddenly ask, “What’s the core variable?” I couldn’t think as quickly as he could so my mind often froze. After a pause he’d blurt it out, leaving me awestruck and a bit humbled. These examples are just slivers of Barney’s practical wisdom.

Another thing I will miss about Barney is his sense of humor, which ranged from dry wit to jokes and puns that were so bad they were good, often eliciting tongue-in-cheek groans. His dry wit sometimes left you wondering, “is he joking or is he serious?” I loved that he made me laugh. I also loved to make him laugh. I began the last conversation I had with him when his mind was still fairly lucid by appealing to his sense of humor and grounded theory. This seemed to kick his mind into gear.

I have known many very, very smart people in my life, but Barney Glaser was the only true creative genius I’ve known. I owe Barney a lot. One of the things I feel I owe him is the truth about his full share of credit for the original design of grounded theory, which he hasn’t always received. Like all the many people who loved him, I will miss him dearly. He was not only my teacher, my mentor, and my dear friend, he was my sage.

About the Author

Odis Simmons was one of Glaser and Strauss’ first-generation Ph.D. students in the graduate program in sociology at the University of California, San Francisco. He has extensive experience at mentoring, teaching, and supervising grounded theory students from multiple academic and practicing professions. He is the originator of grounded action and grounded therapy. He has served on the faculties of The University of Tulsa, Yale University and Fielding Graduate University. He is now happily retired from these positions, but not from grounded theory. Email: osimm@comcast.net